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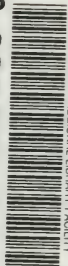
LES HADDON
PURGEON



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CHARLES HADDON
SPURGEON

By A. CUNNINGHAM BURLEY

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CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON

CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON was one of the outstanding personalities of the Victorian era. He was one of the few ministers who had a world-wide audience—a preacher who had only to whisper to be heard of all men. His life and work are one of the cherished possessions of the scattered English-speaking peoples and is a living link which binds many of them together throughout the length and breadth of the earth. It is safe to say that when the history of the wonderful nineteenth century comes to be written, Spurgeon

will stand out as one of the most forceful individuals that England has ever seen.

Although he passed away as long ago as the year 1892, yet he still lives in the admiring remembrances of multitudes who heard him. Many of his contemporaries are dead, and although the number of those who came under his spell is daily diminishing, there is no need to fear that Spurgeon is becoming a back number or a fading memory. He will live as long as England lives, because he so laboured and wrought during his all too brief lifetime, as to keep the soul of England alive.

In the kind Providence of God, Spurgeon was born of wise and tender Christian parents. His birthplace was the ancient and obscure village of

Kelvedon in Essex. His birthday was June 19, 1834. His parents, John and Eliza Spurgeon, brought up a large family in true Puritan fashion, and it is no wonder that their two sons, Charles and James, should have become distinguished ministers of the Gospel. C. H. Spurgeon (like R. L. Stevenson) was specially favoured in coming under the bracing influence of a venerable ministerial grandfather. At the old Stambourne manse there were many things to appeal to the impressionable mind of a growing child. Those who looked after him were persons of singular simplicity and lovers of innocent habits, and allowed him to have the run of the minister's library and the privilege of meeting the pastor's friends.

One of the most notable visitors to the place was the Rev. Richard Knill, missionary at St. Petersburg. Being a soul-winner, he spied out the small boy and took the opportunity of speaking winsomely to him about the love of the Lord Jesus and the joy of loving the Saviour in the enchanted days of childhood. Then followed a most remarkable thing. Mr. Knill took the child on his knee in the presence of all the family and said, solemnly and prophetically, "This child will one day preach the Gospel to great multitudes." He then extracted a promise from the boy (supported by the gift of a sixpence) that when, in years to come, he should preach in Rowland Hill's Chapel, he would give out the hymn :

"God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform."

This promise was fulfilled because the prophecy came true. Spurgeon, without seeking to preach in Surrey Chapel, was incidentally asked to do so, and he addressed a gathering of children on the condition that they should sing William Cowper's great hymn. It was done, to the indescribable emotion of the preacher.

Spurgeon's schooldays were spent happily and profitably at Colchester, Maidstone, and Newmarket. Being an industrious boy, he never felt the bite of a schoolmaster's cane, but qualified in Latin, Greek, and French. Above all, he became an expert penman and laid the foundation for that beautiful, educated handwriting that became in after-life the envy and despair of his friends. Several of his copybooks are

still in existence and their careful entries give a more vivid sense of his personality than almost anything else that can be mentioned.

HIS CONVERSION

The story of Mr. Spurgeon's conversion is almost too well known to bear repetition. Yet no sketch of his life would approach completeness if no reference to this pivotal experience were made. The grace of God which had pursued him with many benedictions since his childhood and had encompassed him as with a shield, now began to work more powerfully upon him. For some little time he had been hoping and groping in the shadows of spiritual uncertainty. But on the morning of January 6, 1850, the lad rose early to

pray and to read in the hope of finding rest for his troubled soul. Driven forth into a thick, blinding snowstorm, with distress and darkness filling his mind, he entered the Primitive Methodist Chapel in Artillery Street, Colchester. There was a meagre congregation in the spacious vacant pews, and, to use Spurgeon's own words, "The preacher was a poor uneducated man who had never received a training for the ministry and probably will never be heard of in this life. He was a shoemaker, a tailor, or something of that sort." But the unknown, unlettered man announced his text, "Look unto Me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth." Of exposition there was none, but of personal, pointed application there was a great deal.

Fastening his eyes on the dejected-looking lad under the gallery, the preacher exclaimed in loud and boisterous tones, "Young man, look to Jesus Christ. You have nothing to do but to look and live." That was the supreme moment. Spurgeon said that he could almost have looked his eyes away through sheer rapture and relief. About four months later he was baptized in the River Lark at Isleham Ferry, by Rev. W. W. Cantlow, on May 3, 1850.

There is no portion of the history of men of power more interesting than that which tells how and when they first showed signs of their strength. This interest is not lacking in the early life of Mr. Spurgeon. On the Saturday following his baptism, he was

found eagerly distributing tracts. The day following he was in the Sunday School, and a few months later we find him delivering a missionary address to an admiring and appreciative audience. Then came his first sermon (an extemporaneous effort) in the little cottage at Teversham. It was an exhilarating experience, enjoyed by speaker and cottagers alike, and there were not wanting those, even in that far-off day, who saw in Spurgeon's first sermon the dawn of that popularity which was the beginning of his long and undisputed leadership in religious circles. The country people liked his preaching because of its originality, freshness, and vigour. Moreover, the youthful preacher had the bloom and dew of early manhood upon him, and it was no

wonder that his growing fame as an Evangelist-pastor in the Fen District should have ultimately reached London. He had been labouring with phenomenal success for several months as Pastor of the Waterbeach Baptist Church when an overture reached him to become the Minister of New Park Street Chapel, Southwark. But this young man of twenty was reluctant to leave his affectionate little flock in the country for a decaying and unknown cause in London. He came, however, and the immediate effect was tremendous. His preaching captured the hearts of his hearers. His name spread far and wide, and all sorts of people flocked from all kinds of places to hear him. Within one year the great empty chapel had to be enlarged and

Exeter Hall had to be requisitioned to accommodate the multitudes that crushed in to hear him. Not that there was anything very bewitching about his personal appearance. His face was heavy with eyelids that drooped as with weight. The nose, cheeks, and lips had a peculiar, sallow, alabaster colour, whilst his broadcloth clothing seemed to hang loose and formless from his corpulent figure. It was when he began to speak that the assembled hosts heard one of the mightiest voices that has ever sounded from a Christian pulpit. There was a clarion sweetness about it that filled the largest building in which Spurgeon held forth. In the Crystal Palace twenty-four thousand persons listened to that voice without effort. Twelve

thousand heard it in a field off King Edward's Road, Hackney, while Exeter Hall, Surrey Music Hall, and the vast Agricultural Hall at Islington echoed with its music and its power.

THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE

In the year 1861 the Metropolitan Tabernacle was opened for public worship. It was also designed to accommodate about seven thousand hearers, which was Spurgeon's average congregation for many years. The fires of his oratory burned brightest in the early seventies, when he was nearly forty years of age and had been ministering to his people for about twenty years. But since his settlement in London his printed sermons had been steadily pouring from the Press. These printed

discourses constitute a literary marvel. Their publication began in the year 1855, and the yearly volumes ran on long after his death in 1892. They may be divided into three groups, corresponding with Isaiah's prophetic classification. There are those that represent the youthful period, when the young preacher mounted up with wings as an eagle. They contain wonderful flights of imagination and impassioned appeal. These are followed in the mid-seventies by those zenith discourses when the great preacher could run and not be weary, when nothing seemed to tire his magnificent vitality. Then came the later sermons with the sunset touch upon them, embracing the last fifteen years of his ministry, when by the help

of the Eternal Spirit he walked and did not faint. Altogether, a wonderful achievement. By means of these discourses and a whole library of other expository and devotional works, Spurgeon made an abiding contribution to the religious thought and knowledge of his times.

His name, however, is not only associated with an unequalled pulpit and literary record; it is connected with benevolent and educational institutions of which he was the chief force and the guiding genius. He did not divorce his pulpit utterances from practical efforts. The Tabernacle with its vast congregations was certainly one of the great attractions of London, but Spurgeon's influence took a much larger range than that of preaching to

massed thousands week by week. He knew that sermons (like newspapers) have a very short life. Like the manna in the wilderness they lose their savour and power of nutriment on the second day. So Spurgeon sought to translate his burning words into living activities that would bless the children of men for generations to come. He not only gathered a Church of over five thousand members ; he also founded an Orphanage for five hundred fatherless children, established a College for the training of young ministers, and endowed a block of Almshouses for the permanent benefit of aged members of his congregation.

Herein we see the rare distinctiveness of the man. There were other great preachers at home and abroad who

were Spurgeon's contemporaries, but he differed from them in one vital particular. He sought to perpetuate himself and his message by means of a College, an Orphanage, and a Colportage Association. Others might feel it sufficient to preach, to pass away, and to let the future take care of itself. But Spurgeon could not rest content until he had founded Institutions which should enshrine his memory, embody his ideas, and express his spirit. If little children could be reared and young preachers could be trained, in the teachings of grace as Spurgeon understood them, he would again go forth into thousands of lives long after his own life on earth had ended. To this fact Spurgeon owes the lasting substance of his fame. In defence of his

College he wrote: "To help young preachers to study the Scriptures and to become more efficient ministers is one of the noblest works that ever moved the heart of man." In vindication of his Orphanage he remarked: "The objects of our care are not far to seek. They are at our gates; widows worn down . . . and children half famished. We cannot look at them without pity. We will work for them through our Orphanage, as long as our brain can think, our pen can write, and our heart can love." Thus Spurgeon's name is preserved from oblivion because his ministry is continued and his benevolence is reproduced.

A more indefatigable worker never lived than C. H. Spurgeon. He never

preached except to full pews and crowded congregations. Gaining the public ear as a boy-preacher he never lost it for a moment. His life-long grasp of success was tremendous. There seemed to be a touch of greatness about everything connected with him. Greatness of character, greatness of genius, with such spiritual depth and wisdom as are rarely found in any Christian teacher.

HIS FRIENDS AND HELPERS

Obviously there must have been underlying reasons for all this. Such a position, so prolonged and unchallenged, could never have been maintained except by the strictest economy of time and the closest attention to duty. But Spurgeon was rich in

friends and helpers. He had around him from the very beginning of his ministry some of the most ungrudging helpers that any minister could wish to have. His distinguished brother, Dr. James A. Spurgeon, was a constant strength and inspiration to him. His deacons and elders were men of good will, giving large margins of their time and thought in furthering the manifold work at the Tabernacle. His colleagues at the Orphanage and College delighted to spend themselves in sacrificial service for their President, whilst his Secretaries and clerical helpers did an enormous amount of desk work that greatly relieved the daily burden of one who was already overloaded. By many gracious gifts and tender acknowledgments, Spurgeon

admitted that he owed much of his ascendancy as a leader and author to the unflagging loyalty of his co-labourers.

Moreover, he was blessed with a wife who for many years was able to give her time and strength to advance the welfare and happiness of her distinguished husband. She was ever at his side, nursing him in illness, accompanying him on holidays, and encircling him with all the tender affection that a wife could bestow. They led a sheltered and beautiful life together in a pleasant house perched on the Beulah Hill at Norwood. Surrounded with ample grounds, it enabled him to enjoy the beauties of Nature and to spend long hours with books, flowers, bird-notes, and healing

silences. The perpetual strain of production, week by week, was amazing, but the retreat afforded by Westwood and the joy of reaching so many thousand hearts were a great support.

There still remains much about Mr. Spurgeon's genius and personality that defies analysis, but it goes a long way towards revealing the source of his power if we boldly describe him as an "overflowing man." Many of the finest qualities of mind and heart repose upon a physical basis. Spurgeon was able to render immense service because he was so vitally alive and so intensely human in everything that he said and did. He was rich in those overwhelming sympathies which are at the root of noble character. During the Victorian Era, two men, in

particular, stood out in all the strongest and best elements of English manhood—John Bright and Charles H. Spurgeon. Nobody surpassed them in downright genuineness of character and conduct. Spurgeon's personality seemed to exercise an influence almost as great as his preaching. Everybody knew that he was absolutely free from anything like meanness, selfishness, or duplicity. He stood out conspicuously as a commendable specimen of lofty behaviour, of unimpeachable rectitude, and of benevolent aims; a kind of human kaleidoscope, at every turn falling into new and beautiful shapes.

HIS NATURALNESS

Nor is this to be wondered at. Spurgeon seemed to have inherited a

particularly simple and straightforward temperament. Indeed, his naturalness seemed to be his outstanding charm. He was not one man in the pulpit and another out of it. If you saw him in his garden one day and in his Tabernacle the next, you saw the same man. He insisted on being himself in all situations and under all circumstances. He was not a mosaic or a weak imitator of others. He never reminded you of somebody else. Affectation was a quality altogether remote from his transparent nature. To his students he said : " Gentlemen, be yourselves, but in being yourself don't be a fool."

James Payn once remarked that one of the secrets of Spurgeon's power and popularity was eloquence combined

with what Luther and Latimer possessed, earnest religious humour. There can be no doubt that this power was enjoyed by him, and like everything else about him, it was perfectly natural. Not that he deliberately went out of his way to shine by saying funny or smart things, but to him a witty something, even in the pulpit, was by no means so unpardonable as a witless nothing however solemnly it may have sounded. He was not ashamed to be reckoned in the same succession as Sydney Smith, Rowland Hill, and John Berridge—men who sometimes gave loose rein to their wit and were eminently successful in their ministry.

HIS HUMOUR

At Guildford, for instance, on one occasion, Spurgeon preached to an overflowing congregation. The hall was packed and many persons were compelled to stand. But Spurgeon's sympathetic humour did not fail him. He quietly remarked, with his invincible smile, "I am sorry so many of you will have to stand all through the sermon, but I shall have to do the same myself, so I know you won't mind."

Again, when addressing a meeting at a country chapel, one of the benches gave way with a crash. He promptly improved the occasion by warning his hearers not to trust to forms and ceremonies! One safeguarding word needs to be said. Whilst Mr. Spur-

geon's friends knew him as genial and jocular, it would be a profound mistake to regard him as a humorist in the pulpit. Mark Twain has reminded us that real humour is only found in the most serious natures. Spurgeon could sometimes give vent to his ready wit, but no preacher was more uniformly earnest, reverent, and solemn in his appeals to the unconverted. Empty drolleries and cheap witticisms could neither have drawn nor held the mighty congregations that waited upon that long-sustained ministry. Even when a few spontaneous oddities mingled with his message, it was still the truth that he was declaring, and as Dr. Robertson Nicoll justly reminds us, "Spurgeon was not afraid to employ a jest or a homely proverb in his preach-

ing, but he was as far from vulgarity as the Apostle Paul himself. He was so constantly in the presence of the august themes of the Christian ministry that it was never possible for him to descend into mere levity or to court a grin." So much, therefore, in praise of Mr. Spurgeon's humour and human-heartedness.

Spurgeon's health began definitely to give way when he was fifty-three or thereabouts. His marvellous vitality was on the ebb, compelling him to spend his remaining winters away in the South of France. The disease which ultimately proved fatal was aggravated by worry. The great preacher in his later years believed that he saw signs of religious degeneracy and decaying faith. He felt very

keenly the flagrant departures from sound doctrinal teaching on the part of some of his pulpit contemporaries. This led him into a well-intentioned controversy which exhausted his last resources of strength. He seemed to reach a point where pressure of anxiety increased as rapidly as strength failed. For many years a sufferer, his end was hastened by the apprehension he felt for the future of Christ's Kingdom on earth. The torments of the Down-Grade Controversy retarded his recovery by neutralizing the action of those remedies which were meant for his restoration.

The end came on January 31, 1892. Spurgeon had been fighting a losing battle with an insidious disease in the sleepy little sun-drenched town of

Mentone. Gradually relapsing into unconsciousness, he fetched a deep, deep sigh, and shortly before midnight passed peacefully away. The news of his death travelled quickly, and the arrival of his coffin in England was marked by overwhelming manifestations of sorrow. Fifty thousand persons viewed the calm face of their friend and benefactor with a grief that seemed to say :

“Why could not the grave forget thee—and
lay low

Some less majestic, less belovèd head?”

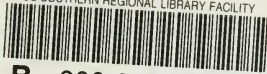
In thinking back over the subsequent years we may regard Mr. Spurgeon as a man whose life enriched the world and whose death was an unspeakable loss. We may safely reckon him

among the builders of his century, a watchman of his period; a man of philanthropy and a preacher of righteousness who deserved the world-wide popularity that came to him, all unsought.

Although his work on earth is done, yet his life has passed into many other lives and will continue to do so. Thus we cannot wholly lose him. Of him we may truthfully and thankfully say what Richard Watson Gilder wrote of John Wesley :

“In those clear, piercing, pitcous eyes behold
The very soul that over England flamed!
Deep, pure, intense; consuming shame and ill;
Convicting men of sin; making faith live;
And,—this the mightiest miracle of all,—
Creating God again in human hearts.”

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